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## IMPACT OF STRATEGY-BASED READING INSTRUCTIONS ON READING ANXIETY OF UNIVERSITY-LEVEL ESL STUDENTS OF PAKISTAN

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**Amna Iqbal**

Lecturer,

Department of Education and Social Sciences, Iqra University, Karachi,  
Sindh, Pakistan.Email: [amnaiqbal@iqra.edu.pk](mailto:amnaiqbal@iqra.edu.pk)**Bushra Ahmed Khurram**

Assistant Professor,

Department of English, University of Karachi, Karachi,  
Sindh, Pakistan.Email: [bushrakhurram@yahoo.com](mailto:bushrakhurram@yahoo.com)**Zehra Hasan**

Visiting Faculty,

Department of Education and Social Sciences, Iqra University, Karachi,  
Sindh, Pakistan.Email: [zehrahasan@iqra.edu.pk](mailto:zehrahasan@iqra.edu.pk)

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**ABSTRACT**

*There is a scarcity of research on the effects of strategy-based reading instructions on reading anxiety in Pakistan. This action research study fills this gap in the literature by examining the impact of strategy-based reading instructions on the reading anxiety of ESL students at the university level in Pakistan. Employing quantitative analysis, this research explored the effects of strategy-based reading instructions on reading anxiety. With a total of 60 participants—30 students in each cycle—the study was carried out in two action research cycles. Over the course of four months, the participants in both cycles received strategy-based reading instructions. The data was gathered by means of a survey of reading strategies (SORS) and the Foreign Language Reading Anxiety Scale (FLRAS) which was administered during the pre-intervention and post-intervention phases of both cycles. The results of this study demonstrate that implementing strategy-based reading instructions effectively reduces reading anxiety in students. The findings of this study provide valuable insights for educators and curriculum developers, emphasizing the significance of integrating reading strategies into instructional practices as they can help reduce reading anxiety.*

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**KEYWORDS**

*Strategy-based reading instructions, Reading anxiety, Tertiary level ESL students, Action research study, Reading Strategies*

**INTRODUCTION**

Even before Pakistan was established, the English language was commonly spoken across the Indo-Pakistan subcontinent (Mahboob, 2009). It acquired formal, political, and social status whilst under British authority (ibid.). In addition, it firmly established its position in formal education as educators started teaching it as a second language from the time of the British rule (Mahboob, 2009). In teaching language, the focus of the language instructors is on developing proficiency in all four skills, including reading as it plays a primary role in second language acquisition (Schramm, 2008; White, 2008). At higher education level, reading comprehension skills are particularly important as English written materials are extensively used in higher education institutions (Grabe & Stoller, 2011). However, research indicates that despite the significant emphasis placed on reading, many students struggle to comprehend and retain information from texts, which is also the case in Pakistan (Khan & Pandian, 2014).

To address the challenges faced by the students while comprehending a text, the studies have emphasized that the teachers use of strategy-based reading instruction as it promotes independence in learning which aid in increasing learners' autonomy (Long & Richards, 1990; Thomas & Rose, 2018). Also, reading researchers have tried to find out the strategies that good learners use so that they could be applied on the struggling readers. For instance, Cohen & Weaver (1998) studied the strategic learning approaches of the 'good language learners'. Later several studies continued to explore the strategies that the good language learners use and its impact on language learning (Khaldieh, 2000; Takeuchi, 2003).

According to reading research, teaching students comprehension strategies have an advantageous effect on their ability to comprehend a text (Willingham, 2006). According to Graesser (2007), comprehension strategies are cognitive and behavioral actions that are intended to increase comprehension. Good readers possess the knowledge of when reading strategies should be used and how it should be used strategies to comprehend a text successfully (McNamara, 2007). The literature indicates that the positive impact of learning reading strategies is not only linked with improved comprehension but it also benefits the struggling readers by improving their ability to deal with emotional challenges that occur during reading like reading anxiety (Oxford, 1990; Chou, 2004).

Among other comprehension related challenges, reading anxiety is also regarded as an

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essential affective factor that hinder comprehension which can be defined as the feeling of worry and general anxiety in the reading process (Zbornik & Wallbrown, 1991). Reading anxiety can negatively impact ESL readers by decreasing their focus and concentration and increasing distractibility (Saito et al., 1996; Sellers, 2000). McIntyre (1999) identifies that reading anxiety arises from the negative early language learning experiences and is negatively correlated with the reading comprehension. Despite the importance of the construct of reading anxiety in comprehending the text, there is limited research that examines the impact strategy-based instructions have on reading anxiety, particularly in the context of Pakistan. To address this research gap, this study adopts an action research approach to explore the impact of strategy-based instruction on reading anxiety among ESL students at the tertiary level in Pakistan. The study aims to provide insights into the effectiveness of strategy-based instruction in decreasing reading anxiety and to offer guidance to educators and curriculum developers on integrating reading strategies into instructional practices.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Critical thinking abilities and academic achievement are both strengthened by reading (Cox et al., 2003; Soto et al., 2019). Moreover, reading is regarded as one of the primary skills among the four language skills because it demands critical thinking on the part of the reader in to comprehend the text (Soto et al., 2019). As a result, developing reading skills is essential for all individuals learning a language (Dickinson et al., 2012). Additionally, having good reading abilities can improve second language learners' academic achievement (Cox et al., 2003). Given these advantages of having strong reading abilities, researchers (e.g. Flood, 1984; Tennent, 2014) researched the comprehension process to enhance learners' reading skills.

The significance of using comprehension strategies in understanding a text has been acknowledged in multiple studies (Duke & Pearson, 2002; Grabe & Stoller, 2011). According to Afflerbach, Pearson, and Paris (2008), reading strategies are intentional mental processes that readers usually use to increase their comprehension and text retention. Furthermore, reading strategies are active cognitive efforts to increase comprehension, according to Grabe and Stoller (2011), who described them as the means by which students strive to understand the meaning of the text (Khurram, 2015; Pressley & Afflerbach, 1995). The literature indicates that the reading strategies are the deliberate and purposeful acts a reader takes to infer meaning from a text (Block & Pressley, 2002; Baker & Brown, 1984). The effectiveness of reading strategies for effective comprehension and general academic achievement was also supported by the National Reading Panel (2000) and Pressley & Afflerbach (1995). The reading strategies improve readers' proficiency by assisting them in overcoming comprehension-related issues (Ahmadi & Pourhossein, 2012).

Apart from the issues students experience while comprehending the text like identifying the main idea of the text, unclear vocabulary or phrases (Ahmadi and Pourhossein, 2012), there are multiple factors that can cause hindrance in the comprehension process like the learners' reading anxiety. It is defined as a feeling of worry during the process of reading (Sellers, 2000; Saito et al. 1996). Reading anxiety has a negative effect on comprehension because it decreases concentration and increases distraction, which negatively impacts on the L2 comprehension performance (Downing & Leong, 1982). Reading anxiety stems from early negative experiences of language learning and is negatively correlated with reading comprehension of L2 readers (McIntyre, 1999).

Brantmeier (2005) also studied on the correlation between reading anxiety and comprehension and found that students are less anxious when immediate comprehension is not needed. According to Lien (2011), EFL students who are working on reading comprehension tasks may experience reading anxiety. However, he also found that students who are using reading strategies have reduced reading anxiety. The relationship is further explored by Zin and Rafik-Galea(2010) and the results showed an inverse relation of reading anxiety and students reading performance. They believed that reading anxiety was one of the primary causes of ESL students' low comprehension skills. Other studies like that of Nordin et al. (2013) indicated different factors that increase the reading anxiety of the learners -text features and personal factors. These studies have explained the association between reading performance and reading anxiety as well as the factors influencing reading anxiety, but they have not addressed the effect of additional factors such as reading strategies.

Given the studies discussed above, it seems that teaching students to read using strategy-based instruction might reduce their reading anxiety (Marashi& Rahmati, 2017) and might aid in the improvement of the learners' reading proficiency. Studies examining how reading instructions affects reading anxiety at the university level are few in Pakistan. Hassan et al. (2015) investigated how a reading comprehension lessons that utilized cognitive and affective teaching techniques affected students' comprehension and reading anxiety. The result of the study revealed that the programme considerably lowered students' reading anxiety and enhanced their ability to comprehend text. While the study offers useful insight on how teaching reading strategies impacts reading anxiety, it presents limited knowledge on effectively lowering students' reading anxiety through reading strategies. Further investigation is therefore necessary to determine the best approaches and strategies to reduce reading anxiety in students of tertiary level where anxiety can adversely impact success and performance in the classroom. Another study (Khuwaja et al., 2016) investigated Pakistani university students' reading comprehension and reading anxiety. According to Khuwaja et al., (2016), increased levels of reading anxiety cause decreased levels

of reading comprehension, which indicates that there is a negative correlation between them. These studies identify the association between anxiety and reading comprehension among the students of Pakistan, but they do not particularly address the impact of strategy-based instructions on reading anxiety.

The review of the studies mentioned above has shed light on ineffective reading instruction (Khan, 2014; Khan & Pandian, 2014; Wang, 2009). Strategies-based instructions have been proven to be effective and it contributes to the improvement of reading comprehension (Baker & Beall, 2009; Zare-ee, 2007; Gersten, Fuchs, Williams & Baker, 2001). Although strategy-based education for ESL classes has proven effective, the literature on the topic is scarce. Furthermore, there are numerous research on reading anxiety and its relation to comprehension. The provided literature evaluation indicates that there are a few gaps in the literature regarding the effectiveness of strategy-based instruction for reducing reading anxiety. Therefore, the objective of the current study is to fill these knowledge gaps which will increase our understanding of reading instruction.

### **RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

1. To examine the influence of strategy-based reading instructions on reading anxiety among ESL learners at the tertiary level
2. To explore how the implementation and usage of specific comprehension strategies can reduce the anxiety a student experiences during reading.
3. The study seeks to provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of the usage of strategy instructions in ESL classrooms to reduce reading anxiety and enhance comprehension skills among tertiary-level students.

### **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

1. What is the impact of strategy-based reading instructions on reading anxiety?

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

In this study, action research methodology is used to investigate the impact reading strategies have on reading anxiety among ESL learners. The data was collected in two cycles of the action research for the purpose of exploring the relationship between reading strategies and reading anxiety. In order to do this, quantitative data analysis was conducted. Particularly, regression analysis was done by performing IBM SPSS statistics version 26. Also, descriptive statistics such as mean and standard deviation were calculated. The data from each cycle was collected from 30 students.

In order to find out the effectiveness of the intervention, multiple regression analysis was conducted to determine whether there is a statistically significant difference between the responses of the students before and after the implementation of strategies

instructions. The surveys; Survey of Reading Strategies (SORS) and Foreign Language Reading Anxiety Scale (FLRAS) were administered. The data was collected from these surveys in pre-intervention phase and post-intervention phase. The SORS (Mukhtari & Sheorey, 2002) was used to find out the frequency of the strategy usage among students as it is a reliable tool for evaluating the reading strategies used by adult ESL Learners.

The FLRAS, designed by Saito et al. (1999), measured participants' reading anxiety in a foreign language environment using 20 items that reflect overall difficulty and specific challenges related to the target language. The FLRAS was chosen for its higher validity compared to other measures of foreign language anxiety (Mikami, 2019). The data from this questionnaire were analyzed statistically to investigate any potential association between reading anxiety and strategy-based instructions.

### DATA ANALYSIS

This study used a quantitative approach to examine how reading instruction that emphasizes use of strategies affects reading anxiety. There were 60 students in all who participated in the study, 30 in each action research cycle. The students in both cycles received four months of strategy-based reading instructions. In both cycles pre- and post-intervention stages, data was collected below is the discussion of analysis of both cycles.

#### Impact of strategy-based instructions on reading anxiety in cycle 1

Pre and post-intervention was carried out during the first cycle of action research. Data from the pre and post-intervention were analyzed separately as can be seen from the table given below:

**Table 1: Standard coefficients and the significance of the observed t-value prior to Cycle 1 intervention**

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta			
1 (Constant)	3.949	.418			9.447	.000
RA_m	-.371	.210	-.332		-1.762	.090

a. Dependent Variable: RA\_M, R Square= 0.110, p-value > 0.05

Note: Reading strategies are denoted by RS, and reading anxiety is denoted by RA.

The above result shows the analysis of the data collected prior to implementation in the first cycle of action research. The results reveal that in the pre-intervention phase the impact on reading anxiety was negative and insignificant as indicated by the B= -

0.371 and p-value= 0.090. However, the results of the analyzed data conducted after the intervention was negative and significant ( $B = -0.399$ , p-value= 0.045) as it can be seen in table 2.

**Table 2: Standard coefficients and the significance of the observed t-value following Cycle 1 intervention**

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
1 (Constant)	3.970	.378		10.499	.000
RS_M	-.399	.198	-.373	-2.011	.045

a. Dependent Variable: RA\_M, R square = 0.129, p-value < 0.05

Note: Reading strategies are denoted by RS, and reading anxiety is denoted by RA.

The data suggests that the students reading anxiety decreased when their teacher taught them through strategy-based instructions.

### Impact of strategy-based instructions on reading anxiety in cycle 2

The Cycle 2 also included analyses of pre and post intervention data similar to Cycle 1, the results showed that the impact on reading anxiety before getting the strategy-based reading instructions was insignificant ( $B = -0.365$ , p-value = 0.137) as it can be seen in table 3.

**Table 3: Standard coefficients and the significance of the observed t-value prior to Cycle 2 intervention**

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
1 (Constant)	4.469	.668		6.693	.000
RS_M	-.365	.238	-.278	-1.533	.137

a. Dependent Variable: RA\_m, R square= 0.077, p-value > 0.05

Note: Reading strategies are denoted by RS, and reading anxiety is denoted by RA.

The impact of teaching via strategy-based instructions, however, was negative and highly significant after the intervention ( $B = -4.462$ , p-value = 0.041). This implies that the students' reading anxiety dropped significantly compared to the first cycle when they were taught using strategy-based reading instructions in Cycle 2 as is evident from Table 4.

**Table 4: Standard coefficients and significance of the observed t-value after intervention in Cycle 2**

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
1 (Constant)	4.616	.578		7.992	.000
RS_m	-.462	.226	-.360	-2.042	.041

a. Dependent Variable: RA\_m, R square= 0.130, p-value < 0.05

Note: Reading strategies are denoted by RS, and reading anxiety is denoted by RA.

### Comparison of the result of Cycle 1 and Cycle 2

It is apparent from comparing the analyses of the two cycles that prior to intervention in both cycles, the impact of reading methods on students' reading anxiety was insignificant. The B value for Cycle 1 was -0.399, but for Cycle 2, it was -0.462 in the post-intervention phase study of both cycles. These two values differ by 0.063, showing that the Cycle 2 participants' treatment was more successful than the Cycle 1 participants in lowering their reading anxiety.

### FINDINGS

The study's findings show how strategy-based reading instruction affects language learners' reading anxiety. In Cycle 1, the analysis of the data gathered prior to the intervention revealed that reading anxiety was negatively but insignificantly impacted by strategy-based instructions. However, following the intervention the effect changed and became negative and significant showing that teaching with strategy-based instructions significantly reduced reading anxiety. Similar trends were shown in Cycle 2, where the analysis showed an insignificant effect prior to the intervention but a negative and highly significant impact following it. This shows that reading anxiety significantly decreased in Cycle 2 compared to Cycle 1 as a result of strategy-based reading teaching.

Comparing the results of the two cycles, it can be stated that Cycle 2 participants' treatment was more successful in lowering their reading anxiety. Cycle 1's post-intervention analysis revealed a B value of -0.399, while Cycle 2's showed a B value of -0.462, showing a difference of 0.063 between the two cycles. This suggests that Cycle 2's strategy-based instruction was more effective than Cycle 1 at lowering reading anxiety. Overall, the results are consistent with the notion that teaching language learners to read with a strategy reduces their reading anxiety. The findings of this study align with previous research that highlights the positive effects of strategy-based reading instruction in reducing students' reading anxiety. For instance, Nguyen, Nguyen, and Pham (2020) observed a significant decrease in reading anxiety among



Vietnamese EFL students after receiving strategy-based training. Similarly, Zhang et al. (2019) demonstrated that teaching reading strategies to Chinese EFL students led to a reduction in their reading anxiety.

An important advantage of action research lies in its capacity to build upon existing knowledge and continuously improve in subsequent cycles. This iterative approach allows educators to be reflective and adaptive in their instructional methods. By analyzing the results and insights gained from each cycle, educators can refine their strategies and make informed decisions about their teaching practices. The aim of this action research is to improve instructional methods in successive cycles by using insights gained from previous cycles (Stringer, 2013). As evidenced by the study's outcomes, students' reading anxiety decreased further in Cycle 2, attributed to the improvements made in strategy-based instruction. The results of this study, along with previous research, strongly indicate that strategy-based reading instruction significantly reduces students' reading anxiety. This highlights the importance of incorporating strategy-based education into reading curricula to effectively alleviate reading anxiety among students.

## DISCUSSION

The purpose of the current study was to inquire into how reading teaching that emphasizes strategies affects reading anxiety. The study used quantitative analysis of the pre-intervention and post-intervention surveys to achieve this goal. The study was carried out in two action research cycles, as discussed earlier. Data from 30 participants was gathered and analyzed for each cycle. Cycle 1's findings showed that the impact on reading anxiety prior to receiving strategy-based reading instruction was insufficient and minimal. The impact of teaching using strategy-based instructions was positive and significant following the intervention, nevertheless. This result suggests that students' reading anxiety decreases when they are taught particular reading strategies and affective strategies by their teacher.

The findings of this study correspond to the studies conducted earlier that explored the effectiveness of strategy-based instructions and its impact in reducing reading anxiety. For instance, O'Malley and Chamot in 1990, Saricaoglu in 2009 and Wang in 2019 advocated the use of instructions that incorporate reading strategies in the classroom. They believe that such instructions improve their ability to comprehend the text successfully. These studies offer strong evidence that teaching reading strategies can have a significant positive impact on students' learning. Teachers can help students feel less anxious and more confident readers by providing them with the resources they need to engage with reading material. As a result, readers may become more proficient readers over time and read more frequently for leisure as well as for academic objectives. The current study offers insightful knowledge about the effective of

teaching through instructions which involves strategies for the purpose of improving students' comprehension skills and for reducing their anxiety while reading.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The current study provides some recommendations for future research. To begin with, the study can be replicated in the diverse context so that its consistency of the findings can be evaluated. Moreover, future studies can also explore the impact and the relationship between individual variable like age, gender, prior knowledge, academic background on reading strategies and reading anxiety. Also, future studies can also determine its long-term impact for that longitudinal study can also be undertaken.

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